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Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister

Unity, Paradise, and the Cosmic Mountain

Mary W. Helms

Abstract. – The architectural format of the early medieval monastery, a widespread feature of the Western European landscape, is examined from a cosmological perspective which argues that the garden, known as the garth, at the center of the cloister reconstructed the first three days of creational paradise as described in Genesis and, therefore, constituted the symbolic center of the cloister complex. The monastery is then further interpreted as representative of the cosmic mountain on whose summit paradise was believed to be situated. Outside its walls monasteries as symbolic mountains anchored and defined the focal points of the medieval European sacred landscape. [*Europe, symbolism of medieval monasteries, garden as sacred space, cosmic mountain, sacred landscape*]

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It is a basic tenet of traditional cosmologies that a given society, whatever its size and however it is politically or sociologically defined, cannot survive solely on its own terms but must constantly reach out beyond the borders of its communities and polities to link its own order to an order beyond itself, that is to say, to the cosmos (Balandier 1970: 101). Considered cross-culturally, the means of accomplishing this task are many and diverse. Some are expressed primarily in ritual behavior; many are assisted and manifested at least in part by special natural and/or architectural settings.

Impressive evidence of the latter may be found both in the structural forms and iconographical details of individual buildings or complexes dedicated to spiritual purposes and in distributions of a number of such constructions throughout a geographical region where they may transform mere topography into sacralized landscapes in which significant supernatural or cosmological qualities and meanings are tangibly evidenced either by particular geographical features or by the siting of architectural complexes with landscape – related features or connotations or by a combination of both.

Impressive evidence of the deeply felt need to relate the vulnerabilities of human society to wider temporal/spatial dimensions through the creation of some form of sacred landscapes can be found in many regions of the world; to note only a few, the networks of earthen mounds characteristic of pre-Columbian eastern North America, the numerous temple complexes of the lowland Maya, the interrelated oracle sanctuaries of the Ibo of Nigeria, the sacred places where the mythic ancestors of Australian Aboriginal tribes first emerged from the earth during the Dreaming, and the distributions of Neolithic chambered monuments in southern Wales are all good examples of this practice.¹

¹ Numerous sources describe the creation of sacred landscapes marked by earthen mounds in eastern North America and by temple pyramid complexes among the lowland Maya; Cameron Wesson provides introductory discussion of both (1998). Ibo oracles are described by Ottenberg (1958).

I would like to suggest that late antiquity and especially early medieval Western Europe offers another case in point. During this era² the culturally created landscape increasingly came to include the abodes of dedicated Christian holy men (and women), growing numbers of whose habitations dotted both towns and countryside. Most notable of these were monasteries³ in which cenobitic monks, who renounced kith and kin, worldly problems and worldly pleasures and rewards, opted to live in communal habitations well removed from the routines of ordinary secular life.

To ordinary laypersons living outside the monastery walls, the bounded and hidden enclosure very likely was a mysterious and hallowed place filled with spiritually rarefied souls; a space forbidden to all but the initiated and the very privileged (see Fischer 1990: 320; James 1981: 41). To those living within, the particular organization of their habitation permitted a more refined identification of space and place. Two of these identifications, both carrying "landscape" implications, are the major subject of this essay: the rather familiar theme of the cloister garden or garth as paradise and the related theme, less considered, of the cloister complex as sacred, even cosmic mountain. Ultimately, however, when expanded into a perspective of the early medieval countryside at large, the cloister as paradise and sacred mountain encourages us to think of the early medieval land-

scape as virtually blanketed with numerous paradisiacal abodes standing atop spiritual mountains that, in the form of monasteries, dotted the landscape in all directions. To appreciate such imagery, however, we must develop an understanding of the monastery in such terms. It is the intent of this essay to do so by discussing some of the general symbolism contained in the monastic complex with particular consideration of the cloister walks and the central garden or garth at the heart of the monastery.

The Monastery and Its Environs

The grounds incorporated within an established monastery can be interpreted as constituting a carefully crafted landscape in their own right in which some locations were set aside and developed to meet the material needs of a community of religious men while other settings were dedicated to maintenance of their spiritual lives (see, for example, Horn and Born 1979). It is the latter that are of particular interest here, for these places and buildings were accorded the qualitative values and sometimes housed the rituals necessary to define the monastery as a whole as a definitive ideological center and a focal point in the broader territory beyond its walls. Inherent in this wider identification was recognition of the monastery as a consecrated center where contact could be effected with supernatural worlds beyond; a place of connections and mediations between cosmological realms where sacred spaces were linked to the cosmos and where liminal monks, while individually pursuing the promise of an eternal spiritual life, as a community of holy men formally dedicated to the ongoing liturgical praise of God (the *opus Dei*), composed a point of conjunction between heaven and earth, between God and humanity in general.

The importance of such conjunctions in early medieval cosmology and theology cannot be overemphasized, for they constituted part of the mystery and joy of cosmological unity which medieval theology avidly sought to understand and celebrate. "The universe is manifold, God is simple; all that is innumerable, infinitely varied, and mutable in the world dissolves into the unity, simplicity, and tranquility of God ... Unity in multiplicity constitutes one of the aspects of beauty in God" (De Bruyne 1969: 139, 77; see also Ladner 1983: 242). Not surprisingly, unity and the beauty it revealed were fundamental to early medieval monastic life and (as discussion of the garden –

Introduction to the sacred landscape of the Australian Aborigines can be found in Biernoff (1978) and also in Tilley (1994: 37–48, see also chap. 2 in general). Discussion of the Neolithic chambered monuments in southern Wales is found in Tilley (1994: part two). An introduction to the entire subject of sacred landscapes can also be readily found in Tilley (1994, esp. chap. 1) and Wesson (1998: 93–98).

2 The overall time period referenced in research for this essay extends approximately from the 4th century up to the emergence of the mendicant orders in the 13th, the period when European monasticism developed and underwent early processes of standardization and reform. Within this extensive period, however, I focus particularly on the monasticism of the 8th to 12th centuries. Broadly speaking, I am interested in the theology, cosmology, and monastic life of Western Europe prior to the theological changes that begin to appear by the 12th century and the monastic adjustments occasioned by the emergence of the mendicant orders. See note 4.

3 The humble dwellings of solitary hermits (e. g., Constable 1988: 239–264; Leyser 1984) and the graves of saints (Brown 1981), not to mention the wide distribution of shrines and oratories where their holy relics were venerated (Geary 1994), were also part of this sacred landscape of abodes but are not included in this essay. In discussing monasteries I am focusing only on communities of monks. Houses for women are not included.

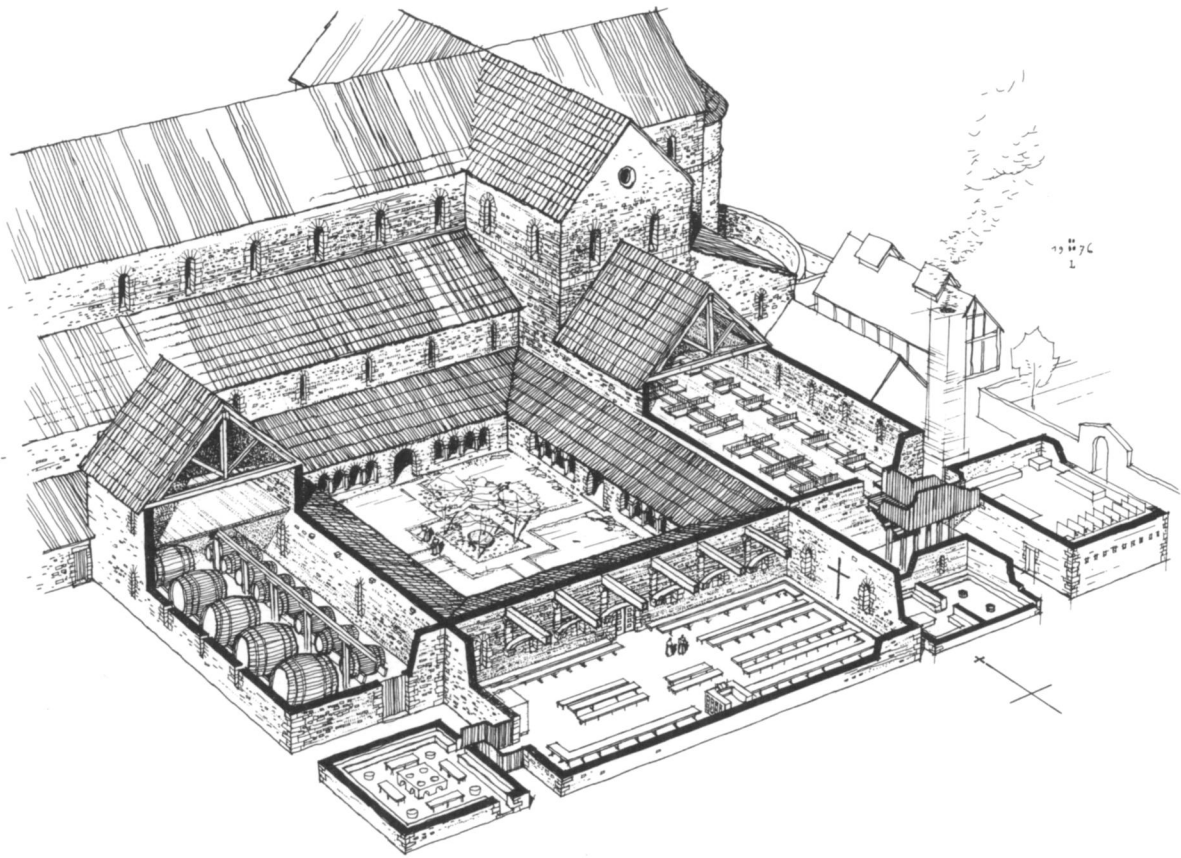


Fig. 1: Reconstruction of principal claustral structures and cloister based on the Plan of St. Gall (Horn and Born 1979: 244).

garth will illustrate) also informed the metaphorical and theological interpretations accorded to or implied in sacred spaces constructed within the monastery. With respect to the individual monastic experience, suffice it to say here that (as numerous authors have explained at length; see notes 4 and 8) monks sought unification with a better world. Striving to reverse original sin and to recreate sacred time, they pursued nothing less than the pure, idyllic, Edenic state of human existence that had pertained at the original creation. Through personal austerities, readings and studies, and liturgical offerings, the brothers strove to attain both closer personal union with their God and a sense of connectedness and of oneness with what we may call the “first principles” that defined and motivated their faith. Foremost among these were references (to be discussed further below) to the conditions characteristic of the original (“mythic”) state of being and becoming believed to have existed during the first days of the created universe as described in the hexaemeron (Genesis 1 and 2.1–3) and the first part of the story of the Garden

of Eden (especially Genesis 2.4–20) when Adam in innocence lived alone with his God serving, as it were, as archetype for generations of medieval celibate monks who, Adam-like, sought to regain some measure of the perfection of that first paradise even as they also prepared themselves spiritually for the final paradise of the parousia.

In pursuing these goals, early medieval monks expressed the ideal of the cosmology and theology characteristic of their age which, in essence, emphasized an engrossing preoccupation with absolute first principles as expressed in recognition of an eternal, God-created, hierarchically-structured, ordered, and unchanging universe in which the significance of all reality was directly referred to sacred beginnings more than to human history (“in its very nature Christianity focused on the creator, the created, and that which bound them together”; Glacken 1967: 172, 253). It also emphasized a distant God made accessible to humans by a glorious Christ theologically interpreted as also full divinity, a cosmic suprahuman remote

from people and a powerful *pantocrator* who was absolute Celestial King and stern Divine Judge of the Apocalypse.⁴

First principles were also expressed directly or indirectly in at least some of the architectural arrangements of early medieval monasteries, as discussion of the garth will clearly evidence. Concerning architectural form in general, the historical origins and early development of Western European monasteries followed a number of different routes in late antiquity and during the Merovingian centuries and are still very unclear in many particulars.⁵ However, there is no doubt that by the mid-eighth – early-ninth centuries the formal arrangement of the basic elements of what was to become the standard format for the typical (Benedictine) medieval monastic precinct was extant. For example, the early Carolingian monastery at Lorsch, built in mid-eighth century,⁶ and especially the schematic depiction of a monastery complex known as the “Plan of St. Gall” (Fig. 1), dating from the early 9th century,⁷ evidence the square cloister complex tucked into the angle created by the (frequently) south wall and adjacent transept of the (typically) east-facing church (as on the plan, though at Lorsch the cloister was on the north side of the church) and further enclosed by close regular arrangement of claustral buildings necessary for communal living. These included, most significantly, the dormitory (typically situated on the east side of the cloister, next to the church transept), the refectory (on the south side), and cellars and larders (often on the west side). The central cloister complex itself was composed of walkways surrounding a central garden; specifically, four covered galleries bounded and enclosed on their outer side by the claustral buildings just mentioned and, on their inner side, defining the four sides of the formal

central garden, the garth, that lay at the heart of the cloister and from which the covered walks were separated by fenestrated walls and low parapets broken by four doorways, one each in the center of each walk, that provided access to the garth (see Fig. 2). The daily monastic routine was conducted among the various claustral buildings and in the cloister walks, where the monks generally lived during the day between the stipulated hours of prayer in the church and communal meals in the refectory.⁸ No formal rites or activities occurred in the central garth, which was apparently utilized instead as a place for individual meditative walks and such quiet conversation as time, duties, and the formal dictates of the rule that officially guided monastic life allowed (see Meisel and del Mastro 1975).

However, the importance of the various locations within the monastic compound does not lie only in their functional utility but also includes the symbolism that pertained to the monastery overall and especially imbued the more important claustral places and underwrote the activities conducted there.⁹ Some of these more specific symbolic assignments are of particular interest in this essay, but it should also be noted, if only in passing, that the medieval monastery as a whole, and especially the church, constituted sacred space in general by virtue of several sacralizing circumstances. The formal ritual of consecration (sometimes simply the saying of the first mass; Markus 1990: 141, 149), which further enjoined protection by God and the relics of patron saints, formally dedicated these premises (Remensnyder 1995: 22, 31–34). The equally formal induction ceremony for admission into the monastic order (Klawitter 1981) and the officially regularized monastic lifestyle in pursuit of an ideal existence (Meisel and del Mastro 1975) helped to create this atmosphere, too. In addition, a monastery often rested on a site that was already sanctified. Not infrequently the geographical setting chosen for an early medi-

4 References for early medieval cosmology and theology are many, but the following were among those providing the above summary: Gellrich 1985: 41; Cassirer 1955: 88; Gurevich 1985: 293; Chenu 1968: 81n., 121, 128; Ladner 1995: 12, 44, 54–58, 65–66, 84, 257; Case 1946: 93, 94; Pelikan 1985: chap. 5; Jungmann 1962: 44; Bynum 1982: 16. This theological perspective began to change markedly during the 11th and 12th centuries when emphasis shifted to greater consideration of the humanity and “historicity” of Christ and the church.

5 See, for example, Desprez 1990; Luff 1952; Clarke and Brennan 1981; McKitterick 1989: 109–111, 121; O’Sullivan 1965.

6 See James 1981: 46 f.; Horn 1973: 42 f.; Sowers 1951: 216 note 51, 234.

7 Horn and Born 1979; Sanderson 1985; Sowers 1951: 284 f., 428.

8 There is a considerable literature concerning various aspects of the culture of the medieval world in which monasticism flourished and the daily routine of monastic life. Useful overviews and many details may be found in (among others) Lawrence 1989; Leclercq 1961; Braunfels 1972; Cook 1961; Horn and Born 1979; Evans 1931; Bitel 1990; Meyvaert 1973.

9 As Fischer has phrased it, “a monastery is a unique and idealized place, requiring a constant renewal of energy to be maintained. It uses symbol and praxis to do so. Both symbols and custom fall into three main categories – community, liturgy, and monastic space” (1990: 320).

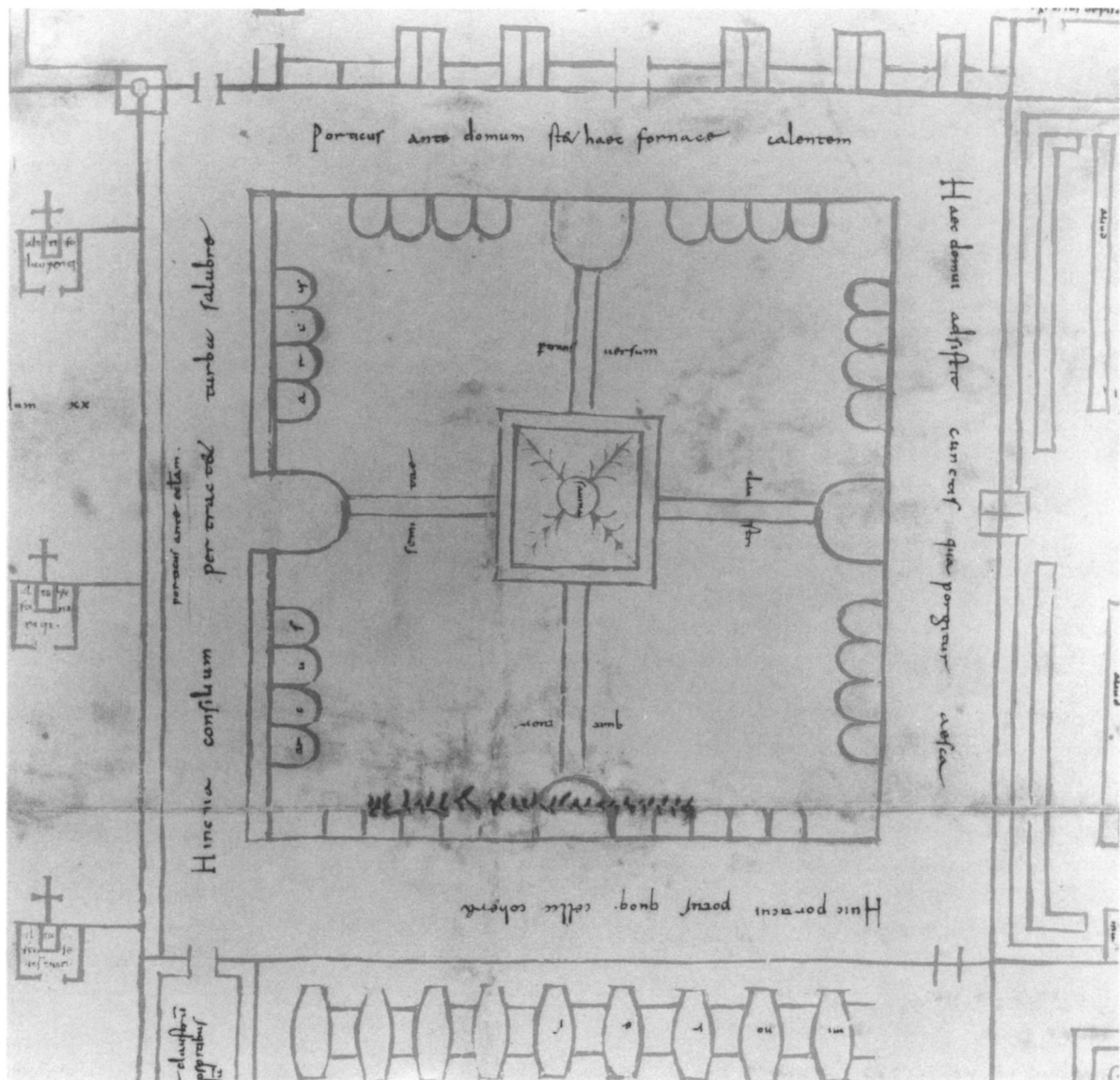


Fig. 2: Plan of the cloister walks and garth, plan of St. Gall (Horn and Born 1979: 257).

eval monastery was one that had been previously identified as a hierophanic place where sacred powers had already manifested themselves. Thus, for example, chosen monastic locations might include sites of ancient pagan tombs or abandoned churches or old altars (Bitel 1990: 48, 82; Remensnyder 1995: 45–46), or sacred groves of trees (Glacken 1967: 310; see also Leeuw 1967: 393–395), or sacred springs.¹⁰ Monastic foundation leg-

ends also mention divine designation (revelation) of a site through visions sent to individuals, often holy men already close to God, or through symbolically significant animals that defined, revealed, or demarcated the location of a hidden sacred place suitable for a future monastery (Remensnyder 1995: 44, 54–66). In all such cases the setting was regarded as perpetually and irreversibly dedicated to God; a hallowed place that was not only intrinsically and essentially sacred but also, by definition, a place of cosmological first principles, for “no mere human being can designate space as part of sacred topography, as a ‘gate of heaven’ ... Theophany, an irruption of the divine

10 Muncey 1930: 77 f.; Remensnyder 1995: 44 f.; Cooper-Marsdin 1913: 41.

is necessary" (Remensnyder 1995: 43 f., 46–47, chap. 1).¹¹

Turning to the monastery proper, the consecrated monastic complex dedicated to its other-worldly purpose has been broadly characterized by modern scholars in strongly first principle terms as presaging the heavenly Jerusalem, reflecting the changelessness and timelessness characteristic of eternity, and standing as microcosm of cosmic harmony.¹² More specific associations have been recognized in individual rooms and buildings. For example, the Biblical "upper room" as described in "The Acts of the Apostles" (20.8) served as prototype for the monks' refectory where a brotherhood of true believers continued to regularly come together to break bread in a place lit with many lamps (Ferguson 1986: 174), while the church proper, heavily symbolic in its particulars, has been described in general as a transcendent interior world basically representing the eternal *Civitas Dei* (Norberg-Schultz 1975: 120, 123; see also below). However, perhaps the most profound symbolism, certainly the most profound first principle creational symbolism, as well as symbolism that again evokes at least in part the theme of a sacred landscape, seems to have been centered on the cloister proper; the garden-garth with its adjacent covered walks that composed the spiritual as well as locational heart of the monastery and whose features allow us to interpret the claustral core as a primordial (Edenic) garden paradise on top of a cosmic mountain.

The Cloister Walks as Ritual Paths

Standing adjacent to the central garth and containing entryways into that garden, the cloister

walks may be broadly interpreted as constituting the threshold to a sacred center (see below) and, therefore, as imbued with the broadly protective and delimiting symbolism that accrues to all thresholds.¹³ In addition, although diverse daily activities were routinely performed in the walks, the conduct of elaborate, carefully orchestrated, and accoutered formal processions typically held there on Sundays and major feast days identifies the walks as a ritual path, a sacred way or ambulatory surrounding the garden-garth, for Sunday processions began in the church, then entered the cloister and moved along the east, south, and west walks (but did not enter the garth) before reentering the church for concluding rites.¹⁴ This formal circumambulation (see note 14) can also be understood in part as a rite of purification that drove the unruly and ubiquitous demons from the monks' living areas both by intruding into the walks the principle and power of cosmological order encoded in the formal organization of the procession (note 14)¹⁵ and by the ritual asperging of the buildings along the outer side of the walls that was also part of the ceremony. In so doing, Sunday cloister processions protectively cleansed and defended space and place and thus were of a piece with similar processions around church walls and altars during church consecrations and around the battlements of towns when threatened by external enemies and even with the ancient practice by farmers of carrying holy relics around the fields to ensure successful crops.¹⁶

11 A properly hallowed setting could also be established by an original act of "taming" wilderness by the clearing of land and the construction of an organized monastic settlement, no matter how rude, in a desolate location. By establishing a sanctified space in the midst of surrounding wilds the cosmological quality and identification of the place was transformed from that of a chaotic pagan wilderness to that of an orderly, even Edenic site under God's protection (Braunfels 1972: 74; Leeuw 1967: 399; see description of the ceremony of possession in Glacken 1967: 309 and n. 68). Related hagiographical accounts also describe the harmonious relationship between monks and wild animals in such rustic locales; a friendship reflecting the (re)creation of earth before the Fall, when sinless man properly coexisted with nature (Glacken 1967: 310; see also Remensnyder 1995: 57–66).

12 Farmer 1991: 184–186; Remensnyder 1995: 21; Constable 1982: 51.

13 Van Gennep 1960: 21, 24; James 1966: 45–46; Eliade 1959b: 25, 81; Cassirer 1955: 103.

14 "First walked the bearer of the holy water, next the cross-bearer between two acolytes carrying lighted candles, followed by the subdeacon carrying the gospels in front of the priest who was to celebrate mass. The convent with the juniors at its head followed at a slow pace; the abbot, turning neither to the left nor the right, walking in the centre of the path and being the last in the procession. Each pair of brethren moved evenly and regularly four feet from the pair in front, all singing the responses" (Crossley 1936: 63). The monks processed along some of the walks on a daily basis, too, as the members of the community formally moved as a body from place to place in the course of their day. "Marching as one, often chanting, at all the various changes of the day . . . the monks truly perfect the procession, the formal motion of one incarnate body dedicated and subsumed to God" (Sowers 1951: 234; see also Sparks 1978: 79–82; Lawrence 1989: 115).

15 "It is the ordered round of the monastery that keeps the devil at bay" (Ward 1976: 195). See descriptions in Crossley 1936: 62 f.; Evans 1931: 82–84; Lackner 1972: 55; *Rites of Durham* 1903: 105, 302 f. and map.

16 E. g., Remensnyder 1995: 32, 34; Koziol 1992: 253 f.; Eliade 1958: 371; Cook 1974: 11; Russell 1994: 181; Duby 1995: 90.

The repetitive nature of the Sunday processions, their regular conduct, week after week, is significant, too, for such periodicity not only bespoke the persistent efforts needed to keep demonic elements at bay (monasteries full of spiritually inclined and virtuous but imperfect men were regarded as favorite demonic playgrounds) but also invoked the principle of ritual repetition by which hierophanies are sustained at sacred centers. Thus the Sunday processions appear as an expression of the basic tenet that “in religion, as in magic, the periodic recurrence of anything signifies primarily that a mythical time is *made present* and then used indefinitely” (Eliade 1958: 392, emphasis in original). In general terms, and in line with the general theology of the age, the mythic time persistently evoked on Sundays and major feast days by regularly ordered processions very likely was that of creational beginnings when first principles of hierarchical order and harmony organized the cosmos. In addition, the processions would appear to have indicated that the earthly locus of the creational time that they evoked was not (or not only) the cloister walks but the cloister garth, for the progress of the processions clearly entailed a ritual circling, that is, a ritual definition of that central place. More specifically, the repeated processions can be understood as constantly (re)evoking the identification accorded to the garth by its own symbols (see below) as a site of Edenic paradise, a physical setting of creational time made present for the brothers who, as would-be Adams, could advance in formal processional order around its border in close threshold proximity to the paradisiacal garden, but whose still imperfect state of spirituality prevented them from formally (ritually) entering it.

The formal weekly circumambulations in the walks thus emphasized the focality of and a context of “inaccessibility” for the garth as a spiritual and locational central place within the cloister compound.¹⁷ In addition, exempting the garth from the cleansing rites, the aspergings, that accompanied the circumambulation would seem to further imply that the garth was also recognized as a place of inherent purity that did not require further protection against demons and the cosmological chaos they represented presumably

because, as first principle paradise, the garth stood in its own right as an inviolable sacred center, a point of hierophanic connection between heaven and earth, a place indicative of the power and beauty of original creation. By definition, chaos would be perpetually banished from such a site and demons would find no lodging there; they could only assail the environs inhabited by still earthly, still sinful men. Omitting the garth from protective and purifying rituals, therefore, can be understood as a quiet acknowledgement and reemphasis of the basic qualities and the mythic creational time already present there.

Paradise and the Garth

When considered in symbolic context, the garth emerges as the true ideological center of the cenobitic community though it rarely has been explicitly recognized as such in scholarly descriptions and discussions of medieval monastic life.¹⁸ Nonetheless, when the qualitative value of its various attributes are considered both in part and, especially, in whole, the garth appears as a sacred place defining a true center or inner “kernel” of enclosed sacred space at the heart of the cloister and of the monastery; an intentionally crafted place that was “intimate and precious” in its own right (Sowers 1951: 229 f.) and that must be regarded as both cosmological and cosmic in significance since “to organize a space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods” (Eliade quoted in Gellrich 1985: 68).¹⁹

18 In light of its more imposing architectural presence and/or the paramount importance of the *opus Dei* in monastic life, the church is often cited as the center of monastery life (e. g., Hunt 1967: 109; Braunfels 1979: xii; Barrie 1996: 230). Sometimes “the cloister” in general has been so regarded (Cranage 1926: 1, 64) or the chapter house (Gilchrist 1994: 166). The cloister walkways are occasionally accorded centrality by virtue of their function as the basic traffic lane linking the various perimeter buildings (Stoddard 1966: 21, 29) and sometimes the four cloister walks together with the garth (Dickinson 1961: 28; Norberg-Schulz 1975: 153). Only Sowers suggests the centrality of a “court” as basic to monastery organization, though his interpretation seems to appreciate the court (garth) with its surrounding buildings as much as the court itself as the fundamental unit in question (1951: 20).

19 In using terms such as “space” and “place” I follow in general the usage in anthropology and geography in which “space” is a human construct for human action and a “place” is a center with human significance and some degree of emotional attachment (e. g., Rodman 1992). “A place is a social construct; a location only becomes a place when significance is conferred on it” (Turner 1988: 421). “It is activity that creates places, giving significance to

17 By emphasizing the garth these rituals further enhanced the role of the walks as a bordering threshold, too, for, as Barrie has noted, “architecture, and particularly sacred architecture, often involves a dynamic between the path and the place. It is possible to examine them separately, but they can only be fully understood in their interplay, as an integrated whole” (1996: 40, 38 f., 119).

As deliberately created and organized cosmological space, the garth encoded numerous symbolic significations and identifications and was accorded a unique and distinctive aesthetic quality expressed by the pleasing arrangement of the parapets, arches, and entryways that defined the boundary, the ordered patterning of paths, plants, and green turf that covered the earth, the focal placement of a fountain, or well, or a tree, and the bright and airy openness to the sky and to light. The garth's sacred symbolism, however, begins with its formal presentation as a bounded and enclosed space, typically, though not inevitably, in the form of a square.²⁰ As an enclosure, this presentation is suggestive of the long-standing Germanic tradition of recognizing circumscription as a means of delineating a qualitatively charged space. Such settings, which were numerous in Germanic culture, typically enclosed a thing or an activity closely associated cosmologically and mythologically with the past or past tradition. Examples include (among others) the rope-enclosed court of law, the stone-ringed grave, and the enclosure of a circular, square, or rectangular sacred space containing a ritual feature such as a spring, hearth, standing stone, or monolith.²¹ In addition, it is particularly noteworthy that, according to Webster's Dictionary, the word "garth," meaning yard or close, derived from Old Norse. According to Pennick (1980: 89), "garth" (and "yarth") also meant earth in the sense of microcosm and are cognate with "gyrth" (gyrth) which, in Old Scottish, meant sanctuary or asylum and was also used to describe the circle of stones surrounding an ancient place of judgement.²² In light both of these past practices and definitions and of the significations encoded in the garth itself, the continued use of the term "garth" in the context of the enclosed garden at the center of the cloister seems appropriate, perhaps as another manifestation of the substantial Germanization accorded early medieval European Christianity in general (see Russell 1994; Riché 1978: 231).

impervious matter" (Myers 1986: 54). More specifically, "the most important spaces were linked to the spot of creation, having temporal as well as spatial value" (Vansina 1985: 125).

20 See Braunfels 1972: 237; Horn and Born 1979: 100 f.; Gimpel 1983: 101. In some cases the shape as well as the size of the garth was altered to accommodate topographical realities as well as the size of the community.

21 Davidson 1988: 27; Bauschatz 1982: 17 f., 137, 138; Gurevich 1985: 47.

22 Compare Bitel (1990: 59 f.) regarding the circular enclosure delineating the Irish monastery as a replica of the cosmos and a hierophanic place.

The square shape given the garth can be appreciated in terms of the sacred geometry characteristic of the Christian cosmological formulations of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, in which the divine order, stability, and harmony of the cosmos were based on numerical ratios expressed in certain "perfect" proportions. The shape of the square (and presumably of the garth as a tangible expression of the square), being based on the "perfect" ratio of 1:1, was indicative of sameness, equality and unity, particularly the eternal, first principle relationship between God the Father and the Son in which God is supreme unity and the Son is unity begotten by unity, as the square results from multiplication of a magnitude by itself.²³ The square also inscribed the symbolism of divine quaternity (that is, perfection reflected in the number four; e. g., Spitzer 1963: 67–69; Hopper 1969: 42, 83–84, 112–113) in the four paths that typically led from entrances at the middle of each of the four surrounding cloister walks to the center of the garth, dividing the garth into quarters and delineating a central point at its heart. In cosmologically informed architecture in general, a square quartered in this way is said to symbolize the four quarters of the world and the center, the point of intersection of the paths, to constitute an *omphalos*; a point of supernaturally charged contact between cosmological worlds (heaven and earth, people and the gods, the living and the dead; Barrie 1996: 115; Pennick 1980: 180). An *omphalos*, in turn, could be marked in tangible iconography by an *axis mundi*. In the early medieval garth either a tree or possibly a well or fountain graced the center of the garth in this capacity, and although the exegesis of the symbolism of both is extensive, a review of some of the most basic tenets can cast further light on the garth's significance.

In the early Middle Ages (as before and since), the tree as a symbolic form embodied the most important doctrines of Christianity, being associated with pristine, first principle origins in Eden (the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge), with humanity's fall from divine grace (the eating of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge), with the atoning event that redeemed that fall (Christ's cross as tree), and with the heavenly

23 See Simson 1988: 27, 49; Pennick 1980; Horn 1975; Ladner 1995: 110, 113. Architecturally, the method for determining the ground plan of the garth and the adjacent cloister walks involved "doubling the square," yielding a proportion of 1:2 between the area of the garth itself and that of the garth and walks combined. This ratio stood next in rank to that of the square as an interval of perfect consonance (e. g., Simson 1988: 16, 21, 40, 49; Gimpel 1983: 101).

paradise of the eternal future (the trees of the celestial Jerusalem) (e. g., Robertson 1951; Rahner 1963: 61–64, 67). As features of the (sacralized) landscape trees were also traditionally associated both with the abodes of eremitical holy men and with the graves of saints and could mark the sites of future monasteries.²⁴ Considered in broader cosmological terms, such symbolically significant trees exemplify the widespread concept of the Cosmic or World Tree, embodiment of profound first principle concepts in many cultures where it stands as unifying *axis mundi*,²⁵ serves as cosmic theophany and, as archetype of life-giving plants, evidences life, immortality, and the mystery of the periodic rejuvenation and perpetual regeneration of the universe.²⁶

In light of these associations it seems reasonable to suggest that the tree that frequently stood at the center of the early medieval cloister garth (the Plan of St. Gall indicates an evergreen savin juniper at that spot; Horn and Born 1979: 123, 246–248, 259)²⁷ not only held a general kinship with trees associated with abodes of holy men in general but more specifically represented one or more of the various Christian interpretations of the doctrinal tree and stood as *axis mundi*, thereby further identifying the center of the garth as a manifestation of the center of the

world (see, for example, Meyvaert 1986: 51 f.; also note 25).

In general myth, legend, and Biblical scripture the cosmic tree and the tree(s) of paradise (past and future) are accompanied by a spring, fountain, or river of flowing water. The fountain appears to have been a fairly common feature of the cloister garth, too, at least by the 12th-century (see Miller 1986: 152; Meyvaert 1973: 58), and in cases when a fountain or well stood at the center of the garth it, too, would appear to have identified that point as an *omphalos*. However, at least one scholar feels that a garth fountain was, in fact, a relatively rare occurrence (Miller 1986: 141) and while there is mention of “gushing fountains of clear water” at seventh-century Jumièges (Horn 1973: 35), on the Plan of St. Gall no well or fountain is indicated in the garth (which may or may not be a telling indication. In the formal arrangement of the garth only one representation, either the tree or the fountain/well, stood at the center and the other, if present, was placed elsewhere in the garden.) Regardless of the frequency of its occurrence in the garth, however, water, if present, could convey marked first principle symbolism in general, for its life-giving potential was well represented both in old German cosmology (Bauschatz 1982: 7, 16–26, 121, 211 f.; Davidson 1988: 25 f.) and in the Christian rite of baptism as well as in earlier Old Testament references to the watery chaos (the deep) preceding creation (Genesis 1. 2,7; Psalm 24. 1–2) and to the nurturing waters of Eden.²⁸ Both the Edenic waters and the waters of baptism underlay the concept of the Fountain of Life developed by early church fathers and elaborated by Carolingian and later medieval theologians (Underwood 1950). Not surprisingly, the presence of a sacred spring could define the site of a future monastery (see note 10) while within the monastery Honorius of “Autun,” writing in the 12th century (but who compiled earlier sources) indicated that the cloister fountain signified the baptismal font which was linked, in turn, to the Tree of Life (Dynes 1973: 61, 64; Williams 1962: 48).

The placement of a tree and perhaps a fountain (or well) in the early medieval garth highlighted the formal presentation of that space as a garden. Although no complete description of a medieval cloister garth-cum-garden is known, the garth is generally accorded the particular arrangements characteristic of the small, secluded

24 E. g., Brown 1981: 76; Riché 1978: 185; Horowitz 1998: 9; Daniélou 1964: 31–34; Meyvaert 1986: 38; see also notes 3 and 11.

25 The cross as cosmic tree was lyrically described by Hippolytus of Rome in an Easter sermon dating from the beginning of the third century: “This tree, wide as the heavens itself, has grown up into heaven from the earth. It is an immortal growth and towers twixt heaven and earth. It is the fulcrum of all things and the place where they are at rest. It is the foundation of the round world, the centre of the cosmos. In it all the diversities in our human nature are formed into a unity. It is held together by invisible nails of the Spirit so that it may not break loose from the divine. It touches the highest summits of heaven and makes the earth firm beneath its foot, and it grasps the middle regions between them with its immeasurable arms . . .” (quoted in Rahner 1963: 67).

26 Kuntz and Kuntz 1987: 319–321; James 1966; Cook 1974; Eliade 1958: 267–288.

27 “Savin” or “savina” is the common name for *Juniperus sabina*, a low spreading shrub or small tree of Mediterranean origin that can range in height and character from a prostrate plant about 3–4 feet tall to a strongly trunked tree of as much as 17 feet with spreading branches and an umbrella-shaped crown. It was introduced into Germany and France in pre-Carolingian times and from there was extended further north (Horn and Born 1979: 246–258, 259; see also Harrar 1969: 137). A savin is also mentioned as the “bush” in the (presumably) center of the garth in the eleventh-century *Horologium stellare monasticum* (Constable 1975: 7 and note 17, pp. 8, 13).

28 Rahner 1963: 69, 79–81; Kuntz and Kuntz 1987: 319; Robertson 1951: 30 f.

hortus conclusus which, in addition to a central feature, such as a well/fountain or a tree, and subdividing pathways, typically contained open ground covered by closely trimmed green lawn and a pleasant and orderly assortment of carefully arranged formal beds of flowers, small shrubs, and evergreens (Harvey 1981: 60 f.; Stokstad 1983: 28–33). However, though enclosed and limited in its horizontal dimensions and secluded within the cloister, the garden garth was not secret or hidden. On the contrary, as Stokstad has emphasized, such a garden, being completely exposed to the expansive canopy of the sky, stood open to everything above: “to the sun, to the elements, to God” (1983: 29–31). Filled, then, with the bright light of heaven (in marked contrast to the dark church and the roofed and shadowy cloister walks surrounding the garth) and standing as an oasis of water, plants, fresh air, and sunlight that was also filled with a deeply expressive silence, the garth as garden constituted “the ideal setting in which to conform the human spirit to celestial things” (Leoni 1996: 73, 80, 84 f. speaking of the wall gardens of sixteenth-century Ferrara).²⁹

Indeed, the garth as an enclosed garden can readily be understood as a literal representation of the concept of paradise, as many authors have done.³⁰ Even as cursory a discussion of the garth’s attributes as has been given here reveals that each feature individually signified the setting forth of some first principle quality while the garth in its entirety recreated analogically the overall nature of primordial paradise, of Eden, conceived of as a carefully crafted (planted) garden which man was to dress and keep (cf. Rykwert 1972: 13; Genesis 2. 8, 15). Indeed, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Helms n.d.), the early medieval garth with its tree, water, and vegetation (see note 29) seems to have recreated not simply paradise but, more specifically, the first three days of the hexaemeron, the very beginning of the creation, the still or “static” period, as Leach has phrased it (1969), when the heavens were distinguished from the earth and light from darkness, the firmament was

created and the sea separated from dry land, and “asexual” (as it was then believed; cf. Horowitz 1998: 37) seed-generated vegetation grew but before the creation of active life forms of sea and air and land that procreate bisexually (see also Coogan 2001: 11 f. [Hebrew Bible] notes for Gen. 1, verses 14–30; also note 30). Likewise, the garth seems to have also referenced the first stages of the Garden of Eden when Adam in innocence lived alone in unity with his God before the creation of Eve (Leach 1969; also Helms n.d.). Considered in these terms, the definitive characteristics of the early medieval garth not only emphasize creational first principles in general but reference the very start and the “highest” order of principles designating cosmological Firsts; replicate the beginning of the beginning, the paradise of original creation as it was in its initial, purest, most ideal condition and in its total perfection of differentiated “oneness” and unity.³¹

The Cloister and the Cosmic Mountain

As was indicated at the beginning of this essay, expression of unity was essential to early medieval cosmology, theology, and monasticism. The careful organization of the monastic life clearly bespoke this fundamental sense of common accord, for the carefully ordered daily routine (see Meisel and del Mastro 1975) formally coordinated a series of set activities conducted in various locations – church, chapter house, cloister walks, refectory, dormitory – into an integrated whole. The cloister garth, though uninvolved in formal community life, nonetheless also played a vital role in expressing the completeness of the whole by explicitly emphasizing unity. Like monastic life in general, it did so by the symbolic conjoining of the multiple discrete components that, as an ensemble, composed the garth itself, thus allowing the garth to stand forth as constantly evoking, in microcosm, the “principle of unity in multiplicity.”

By virtue of the combined symbolic significations encoded in its various features the garth encapsulated that unity in a strongly condensed

29 A complete discussion of the symbolic features of the garth would also include consideration of the significance of grass and of the color green as representative of the seed-bearing earth and of eternal spring (life) as well as more detailed discussion of the garth as the center for the monastery’s reception of celestial light (*lux*).

30 George Duby succinctly summarized this well-known identification, noting how in the cloister garden “the air and sunlight, trees, birds and flowing streams still kept the freshness of the first days of the earth; a sort of paradise regained where all things testified to God’s perfection” (1995: 63).

31 In early Christian and medieval number symbolism odd numbers, since they were not divisible, were regarded as more Godlike and “perfect” while even numbers, like the duality that appears with Adam and Eve, being deviations from unity, signified the corruptible and the transitory. The first three days of creation thus foreshadowed the trinity, the triad defined as perfect unity (Hopper 1969: 42, 83 f., 89, 101).

form. Unity was heralded in the sacred geometry of the garth's square shape as well as in its spatial location as the architectural center of the cloister complex, where it complied with the medieval dictum that the center of a symmetrically proportioned form was indicative of "the way, the truth, and the light" (see Eco 1986: 40). Unity existed in the multiple symbolic referencings encoded in the complex of tangible accoutrements that, taken together, defined the garth as Edenic paradise and replicated the oneness of the first three days of creation. Unity would have been referenced, too, as various tangible symbols defined the center of the garth as a probable *omphalos* and as site of an *axis mundi* where first principle cosmic conjunction could relate heaven and earth. Ultimately the combination of all these qualities identified the garth as "symbolic" in the principle sense of the term as used by church fathers to mean a "drawing together," a summary and token or creed, of basic truths of Christianity (Ladner 1983: 240).

Much of the conjunctive first principle symbolism expressed by the garth is also associated with the concept and extensive imagery of the sacred mountain, particularly with the cosmic mountain, a very widespread cosmological theme and one that quite possibly may be directly implicated in the symbolism of the garth and, by extension, of the cloister in general. The cosmic mountain is so called because it stands as a sacred center linking heaven and earth and central to an entire worldview (Eck 1987: 130). Ancient cosmogonies describe how the cosmic mountain or primeval mound rose out of the infinite depth of the primordial ocean at the time of original, first principle creation; how the creator-god made his appearance on it; how it was filled with prodigious energies and vital forces and served both as the *axis mundi*, where earth and sky met, and as the *omphalos* of the world, the point of absolute beginnings.³² As a manifestation of the *axis mundi* the cosmic mountain is also frequently associated with the World Tree, which may be represented iconographically as standing on its summit; life-giving cosmic waters (rivers) have their source at the mountain, too.³³ Not surprisingly, earthly mountains, standing high, often have been asso-

ciated either with this central universal point or at least with its permanence and stability, and are designated accordingly as sacred places on the landscape where they may serve as places of revelation and vision and of pilgrimage.³⁴ Mountaintops, being the nearest thing to the sky, are especially implicated in symbolism of ascent and transcendence, with visions of both heaven and earth, and speak of things celestial, especially of bright celestial light and of proximity to the divine ("The oldest heaven is the mountain-top"; Leeuw 1967: 55; Eck 1987: 132); indeed, God may appear on the mountaintop or mountains may be spheres of the divine in their own right (Keel 1978: 20; Eck 1987: 132 f.; Scully 1969).

In the context of Christianity and its forebears, sacred mountains feature prominently in Biblical and related texts. In the Old Testament the most important mountains are Sinai, the cosmic mountain of first principles in the arid wilderness on whose cloud-covered summit Moses encountered the majesty of Yahweh and covenanted with Him, and Zion, the sacred mountain of Jerusalem as the royal city of David, of the Temple, and of divinely favored and God-protected history.³⁵ In addition, according to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will appear on the summit of the holy mountain (Eliade 1965: 54 f.) and various mountains figure prominently in the life of Christ, among them Calvary (Golgotha; by early medieval centuries believed to be the summit of the cosmic mountain where Christ will also return), the Mount of Olives (associated with the last days of Christ and by tradition accepted as the site of the ascension), and the mountain of the transfiguration.³⁶ John, the author of Revelation, was shown in vision the descent from heaven of the holy city of Jerusalem from the vantage point of a great, high mountain (Rev. 21.10) and – of particular significance for the monastery garth – the Garden of Eden, the center of the cosmos where Adam was created and the source of flowing rivers and of trees, also is located on the cosmic mountain.³⁷

32 In some cosmologies mountains also constitute world pillars that support the vault of heaven at the horizon (Keel 1978: 22 f.; Eck 1987: 131).

33 See, for example, Bernbaum 1997; Leeuw 1967: 55; Eliade 1958: 99–102 and 1975: 380; Cook 1974: 9 f., plate 7; Moynihan 1979: ill. b on p. 8, 8 f.; Anderson 1988: 190 f.; Clifford 1972: 158 f., 191; Levenson 1985: 20, 111–137; Keel 1978: 28 f.

34 Eck 1987: 132 f.; Bernbaum 1997; Eliade 1975: 379 and 1958: 100 f.

35 Levenson 1985; Clifford 1972: 107–120, 131–160, 180, 191 f.; Bernbaum 1997: 99 f.; Cohn 1981: 38–61, 66–70.

36 Donaldson 1985; Bernbaum 1997: 89; Leclercq 1961: 68; Eliade 1965: 58 n. 3 and 1959a: 13, 14.

37 "You were in Eden, the garden of God ... you were on the holy mountain of God ..."; (Ezekiel 28.13–14, 16; see also Coogan 2001: 1220 [Hebrew Bible] note for Ez. 28.13–14; Clifford 1972: 51, 100, 103, 159; Levenson 1985: 128, 129, 131, 139; Bernbaum 1997: 88; Cohn 1981: 30. Apsidal mosaics in early Christian basilicas frequently depict Christ seated on a throne and surrounded by

Indeed, Eden's mountain stands as the archetype of the cosmic mountain in that, according to both ancient and medieval exegesis, it stood higher than all the other peaks and thus was not inundated by the waters of the Deluge but instead provided a refuge from that destruction.³⁸ As such, Eden on its mountaintop, safe from harm, reflects a traditional theme in both Classical and Christian literature whereby the terrestrial garden paradise, being a very desirable and blessed spot, is situated at a place separated from and inaccessible to the inhabited world with its mortal imperfections (Ladner 1959: 64, 66; Giamatti 1966: 79 f., 85). Generally the "distant" setting, marked by a grove of trees, is high on a mountain (alternatively, some place far to the east; Giamatti 1966: 50 note 52, 53–55, chap. 1 in general).³⁹

Not surprisingly, the sacred mountain was also widely expressed architecturally. Various forms of temples and mounds, often bearing hill-related names, have been interpreted as representing the primal mountain or as being built on a sacred or cosmic mountain (e. g., Coogan 2001: 13 [Hebrew Bible] notes to Gen. 2.10–14) and have delineated the focal points of sacred landscapes.⁴⁰ This can be the case even in geographical regions far from actual mountains, for physical elevation or even an appreciable rise of terrain need not be in evidence; a topographically flat plain can readily house a "mountain" temple since shrines interpreted as earthly expressions of the sacred mountains are thought to be sited at that point regardless of actual geographical location (Anderson 1988: 191 f., 199, 207; Levenson 1985:122–124).⁴¹ Nor is it absolutely necessary for a temple to literally emulate an elevational character in order to situate a sacred mountain, though other features thought character-

istic of the mountain may be architecturally present. For example, mountain temples often emphasize the stability and permanence of the cosmic mountain (and of the world) by being built "four-square," that is, with ground plan in the shape of, and emphasizing, a square (Pennick 1980: 18 f.). I should like to emphasize this point because I wish to suggest that the architectural form of the medieval cloister, specifically the foursquare garden garth with its surrounding walks, when considered in conjunction with the first principle symbolism it manifests, may also evoke the theme of the paradisiacal cosmic mountain even though the literal representation of geographical elevation is missing in the design of the cloister.

This interpretation is encouraged by the use, in medieval thought, of the "mountain" as a trope for the monastery and the monastic vocation in general (though not the only one by any means; the related concept of paradise, among others, was similarly applied), although the actual geographical sitings of early medieval Western European monasteries generally did not explicitly favor mountainous settings over other locations. Rather, the paradisiacal themes of separation from worldly society and of inaccessibility, which were architecturally expressed in the enclosed structure of formal cenobitic houses whether built in town or countryside, were at times enhanced by continuing the long-established and admired practice of situating monasteries on islands or in isolated wastes and in the wilderness of the forest; "places on the edge" that, to be sure, sometimes were marginal because they were also rocky or mountainous. Thus, in some such cases, monasteries were literally constructed among and on the mountains.⁴²

Regardless of actual locality, though, the mountain and the mountaintop became monastic metaphors for the incomprehensible majesty and grandeur of God and for the challenging and sometimes frightening search for knowledge of the unknowable. The image of Mount Sinai became a symbol for this quest when it was expressed in terms of the darkly apophatic (Lane 1998: 107–109).⁴³ In com-

Apostles on the summit of a mountain whence flow the four rivers of Paradise (Hobbs 1995: 133; Duchesne 1912: 302).

38 Keel 1978: 113–118; Levenson 1985: 135; Anderson 1988: 190, 199–202, 206, 211, 220 n. 52; Boas 1948: 80; Meyvaert 1986: 50 n. 104; Eliade 1975: 375.

39 Extending the theme of distant heights, the garden of paradise was also accorded fully supraterrrestrial location high in the air, often near the moon or in the third level of heaven as described in St. Paul's rapture (II Corinthians 12.2–4). Sometimes the earthly mountaintop, crowned with paradise, stood so high that it touched the moon (Ladner 1959: 64–66; Corcoran 1945: 17 n 3; Giamatti 1966: 45, 56, 79 f.). The paradisiacal garden is frequently located on the cosmic mountain elsewhere in the Near East, too (Manuel and Manuel 1971: 92; James 1966: 74, 75).

40 E. g., Eliade 1958: 100 f.; Davies 1987: 384; Eck 1987: 131; but see Bernbaum 1997: chap. 6 n. 1.

41 "Most of the great Egyptian sanctuaries claimed to house within their courts the primeval hill, the 'glorious hill of the primordial beginning,' which had first emerged from the floods of Chaos" (Keel 1978: 113, also 114).

42 E. g., Lane 1998: 46–49, 106 f.; Le Goff 1988: 50 f., 58 f.; Workman 1927: 142, 159, 174, 220 f., 238, 241; Remensnyder 1995: 23, 24, 56. Saint Basil describes the wilderness, the home of those seeking the Lord in solitude, as a place of covenant and of sacred mountains as well as of deserts and caves (Williams 1962: 39).

43 Origen likened those who were filled with the Word of God (as evidenced in their lives, knowledge, and teaching) to mountains and hills; similarly, attainment of the highest state of contemplation could be described as residence on an Inner Mountain (Costello 1976: 334 and note 9; see note 46).

plementary fashion, when God was to be glimpsed in all the splendor of light, the earthly mountain in question was the mountain of Christ's passion, transfiguration, and anticipated future return, geographically set in or near Jerusalem but located spiritually in any place (such as the monastery) where, far from the world and from sin, one could draw close to God.⁴⁴ "The mountain of the return is the symbol of the monastic mystery, and for every Christian who becomes a monk, it is as if he always lived in this blessed spot. It is there that he can be united to the real Holy City," meaning (for writers like Saint Bernard) the heavenly Jerusalem, which for the monk was accessible through the monastery (Leclercq 1961: 68, 69). "The monk leaves the world . . . he separates himself from it. He goes away into solitude, often onto a mountain, the better to fulfill the precept that the Church, on the feast of the Ascension, gives to all the faithful: 'to live in the celestial regions'" (Leclercq 1961: 70, referencing sermons by Bernard).⁴⁵ Odo of Cluny used similar imagery when he compared a good monk ready for monastic life to a mountain peak already bathed in the light of eternal dawn (Hallinger 1971: 40).⁴⁶

Bearing in mind these monastic allusions to the cosmic mountain, it is instructive to compare the architectural and material arrangements of the claustral garth and surrounding walks with the schematic diagram of the generic cosmic mountain offered by Cook (1974: 10), somewhat simplified here as Fig. 3 (see note 47), which depicts the mountain as set on a square base with a path in the middle of each side leading upward to the center point where the four paths cross and the cosmic tree stands. Sanctuary walls around the base mark the boundary between the sacred and the profane, defending against "the demonic forces of chaos" which continually threaten from without. These walls apparently are also walkways, for they are also the location of ritual circumambulations

(Cook 1974: 10 f.; see also Barrie 1996: 119).⁴⁷ If the walkway walls are recast as covered galleries and if the elevational feature is flattened, Cook's schematic diagram becomes virtually identical with the physical form (enclosed square outline, four paths leading from the middle of each side to the center) and major accoutrements (center tree or possibly fountain) of the typical early medieval cloister garth with its surrounding cloister walks, which also provide a ritual path for purifying, demon-thwarting circumambulating processions. By now it should be obvious, too, that the basic cosmological identification of the cosmic mountain as a central place and *axis mundi* expressive of the most fundamental imagery of first principle creation and indicative of the paradisiacal garden and of contact with God also is virtually identical with the symbolism expressed in the garth.

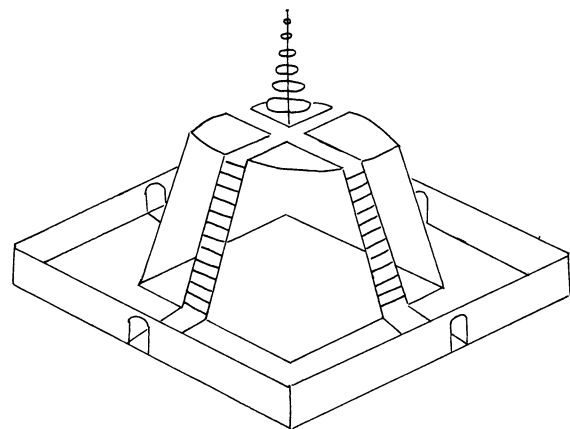


Fig. 3: The Cosmic Mountain (adapted from Cook 1974: 10).

Descriptions of cosmic mountains, however, frequently place the beckoning but inaccessible garden of paradise at the summit of the peak. This image can be accommodated to the claustral setting if we broaden the perspective to include the surrounding monastic compound and assert that the medieval monastery *in toto* be assimilated to a sacred mountain with the garden-garth, also ceremonially "inaccessible" during circumambulations, standing as the sublime paradise and "revelatory landscape" (cf. Eck 1987: 132) at the

44 "The monastery shares Sion's dignity; it confers on all its inhabitants the spiritual benefits which are proper to the places sanctified by the life of the Lord, by His Passion and Ascension, and which will one day see His return in glory" (Leclercq 1961: 68; Lane 1998: 113).

45 Compare the ascetical holy men of Syria who called themselves "men of the mountains" and sometimes deliberately sought to live on the mountaintops (Brown 1971: 83).

46 In medieval Cistercian literature John of Ford defines the monk's spiritual life as a flight from sin followed by a striving for poverty, peace, and patience so as to be able to follow Jesus "into the mountain" and culminating in the attainment of "the sublime desert at the top of the mountain," that is to say, the highest state of contemplation of the divine (Costello 1976: 334).

47 Cook's original diagram also includes a flat spiral within the base of the mountain out of which rises a double helix of entwined serpents. The significance of the serpent in the context of the creational center is, of course, well-known. The spiral as a means of denoting the center and the mountain is considered by Purce (1974: 18).

summit.⁴⁸ The logic of such an association has been explicitly stated by Eliade (in mountain-related general discussion of holy sites and sanctuaries as situated at the center of the world) in words that seem tailor-made for the medieval monastery especially as viewed by the brothers resident there: “our world” is holy ground because it is the place nearest to heaven, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven; hence our world is a high place.” Eliade then continues with a more refined interpretation, one that seems particularly appropriate for the garth proper as paradisiacal site of the *axis mundi* and closest of all the monastic spaces to heaven, when he goes on to say that “this religious conception is expressed by the projection of the favored territory . . . onto the summit of the cosmic mountain” (1959b: 39).

Conclusion

In Biblical tradition the cosmic mountain as first principle archetype is a place where innocent man (Adam in Eden) and prophetic man (Moses on Sinai) first approached and encountered God. Seeking to attain some degree of approximation to this grace, medieval monks, striving to be morally ideal persons and as would-be innocent Adams, were permitted, by virtue of habitation in the cloister and pursuit of a carefully regulated spiritual life, to live in close association with their version of the cosmic mountain, too. In actuality, however, the medieval monastery was composed not of one but of two sacred centers, the cloister garth, which emphasized cosmological first principles, and the church proper, largely defined by incarnational and ecclesiastical historicity. This duality (which opens perspectives on medieval monasticism that go beyond this study) has a strong parallel in the relation between the two most fundamental mountains of Judaism and early Christianity, Sinai and Zion. In the ancient Hebraic tradition, the first principles originally heralded at Sinai, revelatory mountain of the prophet and of the covenant, eventually underwrote and legitimated Zion as historical Jerusalem, the fortress mountain of the temple and place of the priest, even though the exact location of the mountain of Sinai itself was

lost and forgotten (and continues to be a matter of debate), leaving Zion/Jerusalem as a physical entity to stand alone.⁴⁹ In somewhat similar fashion, early medieval Christian imagery (monastic and ecclesiastical) explicitly focused on Jerusalem⁵⁰ as the earthly and historical formulation of the celestial city of the future for which monastic life was a preparation.⁵¹ In this context, the abbey church (considered both as a community of faithful and as a building) was interpreted as a symbolic representation of the heavenly City of God and as analogue of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem as well as of the Temple of Solomon.⁵²

Unlike Hebrew tradition, however, in the medieval monastic setting the ecclesiastical “Jerusalem” did not stand alone while its first principle – oriented “Sinai” dimmed. Far from it, for antecedent first principles continued to exist, rooted not only in tropes of original hierophanic revelation that identified monastic sites but also, and especially, tangibly reconfigured as the paradisiacal Eden on the primordial cosmic mountain manifested by the garth and its surrounding walks at the center of every monastic cloister. Similarly, as in the relationship between the two great mountains of Israelite tradition in which “the presence is the presence of Zion, but the voice is the voice of Sinai” (Levenson 1985: 188), so in the monastery the liturgical duties of the church, the setting for the *opus Dei* that dictated the organization of the monastic day and night, commanded the energies and the greater physical presence of the monks but an underlying voice speaking of first principles and Adamic covenants basic to the overall monastic

48 The analogy is further encouraged by the fact that, like the sacred mountain, the monastery is also surrounded by bands of holiness such that only the purest, most spiritually developed, can actually serve (live) within its inner sanctum while those less worthy must remain beyond the boundary and derive its benefits only from a distance.

49 Eck 1987: 132; Levenson 1985: 90, 187; Hobbs 1995: 33, 51–53. Historically most Jews have avoided assigning an earthly location to Mt. Sinai, for the presence of the Hebrew God was transferred from the mountain to the tabernacle. Christians, however, have long sought to identify a topographical site. Although there is no firm agreement, the favored site has been Jebel Musa in the south of the Sinai Peninsula. A settlement of monks, which became the famous monastery of Saint Catherine, was established there by the 4th century and has continued to this day. See Hobbs (1995); Bernbaum (1997: 95 f.).

50 Jerusalem having been rebuilt as the center of the Christian faith after the destruction of the Jewish Temple (Binns 1994: 82–84).

51 The monastery in this context was “a Jerusalem in anticipation, a place of . . . preparation for that holy city towards which we look with joy” (Leclercq 1961: 69, 70; Remensnyder 1995: 21, 44, 84; Russell 1997: 43; Pelikan 1978: 42).

52 Barrie 1996: 229; Norberg-Schulz 1975: 146; McDaniel and Lang 1988: 78; Hunt 1967: 110; Remensnyder 1995: 33, 35; Simson 1988: 37 f.

experience emanated from the imagery of the quiet garden that stood as symbolic replication of the paradisiacal beginning.

Outside the monastery walls, however, the finer distinctions of monastic experience were of less importance. Instead, the monastery as an ideological whole stood as "the inclusive center of the landscape" (Remensnyder 1995: 72). In a study of monastery foundation legends in medieval southern France, Remensnyder has detailed (1995: chap. 2) how monastic centers became the symbolic focal points of otherwise generic, undefined territory through various processes related to their individual beginnings and foundations. She also recounts (among other things) how wider networks of secondary religious communities, churches, and chapels deriving from an original monastery and also established on sacred sites generally identified in legend as revelational (even if valued or selected by more earthly circumstances, too) could link a number of separate topographical points into an ordered "world." A world of this sort is initiated by the abbey's origins; then "a map is created, and the abbey is at its center" (1995: 73 f.; cf. Pennick 1980: 41). I would amend and deepen this evocative statement by suggesting that the founding abbey that marked the center and stood as place of origins and as legitimating ideological anchor for such a topographically and ideologically interrelated world can itself be appropriately appreciated as the symbolic cosmic mountain, site of creational paradise and cosmological focal point of the surrounding microcosm. The early medieval European landscape was blanketed by such monastic "mountains" and their worlds.

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